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Department
of Human
Services

Prepared by the
DHS Office of
Communications
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Articles in Today's Clips

Thursday, August 7, 2008

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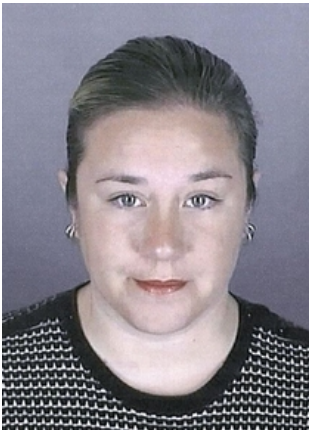
Thursday, August 7, 2008

St. Clair Shores

Teacher charged in sex acts with students

South Lake High School culinary arts educator faces up to two years if convicted of assault on two teens.

Charles E. Ramirez and Christina Stolarz / The Detroit News



ST. CLAIR SHORES -- A South Lake High School teacher is facing up to two years in prison for allegedly engaging in sex acts with two students on a boat earlier this summer, authorities said Wednesday.

Melissa Lavender, 33, was charged in 40th District Court in St. Clair Shores with two counts of fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct, both misdemeanors. If convicted, she faces up to two years in prison.

St. Clair Shores Police Detective Harold Bergeron said even though the alleged victims are both of the age of consent, state law forbids teachers from having sex with students who are under 18 years old.

Lavender, a culinary arts teacher and mother of two, stood mute as she was arraigned in court before Judge Joseph Craigen Oster.

Her Warren-based attorney, Michael Dennis, spoke on her behalf. Through Dennis, Lavender waived the formal reading of the charges and entered a not guilty plea. She also waived her right to having a preliminary exam set within 14 days.

The judge scheduled a pretrial conference for Aug. 26. He also set a \$25,000 personal bond for Lavender, which she posted.

"I don't think you're a flight risk or a threat to the community," Oster told Lavender in court.

The judge also ordered several conditions to her bond: Lavender is to have no contact with any of the witnesses or alleged victims; she is to have no unsupervised contact with any minors; and she's forbidden to consume alcohol or drugs. In addition, she must also submit to random Breathalyzer tests four times a day as long as she's on bond.

Police and prosecutors accuse Lavender of engaging in sex acts with two teens on a boat belonging to the family of a former South Lake High student. The two are ages 16 and 17 and currently attend the school.

The boat was docked in a marina in St. Clair Shores at the time of the alleged incidents, which police said occurred in the overnight hours of June 26.

Police said Lavender was the only teacher aboard the boat at the time of the incidents.

Alcohol is believed to be a factor, Bergeron said.

Dennis called the charges "very serious."

"From what everyone says, all the students and parents who know her love her. These allegations are totally out of character."

In the meantime, the South Lake Schools district has suspended Lavender with pay, pending further investigation, said Deborah Thompson, the superintendent. Lavender has worked for the district for six years.

"Students and parents came forward," said Thompson.

"We're deeply saddened by these allegations. Our first priority is to follow our policies, ensuring the safety and support of all our students."

Lavender started with the district as a foods teacher and then took over the culinary arts program, she said.

A substitute culinary arts position was posted as vacant Tuesday on the district's Web site.

Thompson also posted a letter to "South Lake Families" on the high school's Web site, acknowledging that she's been informed of "alleged serious misconduct involving a high school teacher and students."



Thursday, August 7, 2008

Detroit

Grandson injured as man shoots pit bull

Owner cited after dog escapes yard across street, runs toward 9-year-old, who's expected to recover.

George Hunter and Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- A 9-year-old boy who was grazed in the leg by a bullet that went through a rampaging pit bull is expected to recover, police said.

The boy and his 60-year-old grandfather were leaving their house in the 18000 block of Plainview on the city's west side about 7:50 a.m. Wednesday when a pit bull escaped from a yard across the street and started running toward the boy, police said.

The boy's grandfather shot the dog. "The bullet traveled through the dog and hit the boy in the leg," Detroit Police spokesman Leon Rahmaan said. The grandfather had a concealed weapon license, Rahmaan said.

The wound to the boy's left thigh was not serious, Rahmaan said.

"He should be fine," Rahmaan said.

Animal Control officers picked up the dog, who survived the shooting, police said. The owner of the dog, who breeds pit bulls, was issued a ticket for the dog being loose, Rahmaan said.

Whether the dog will be destroyed depends on what animal control officers discover during their investigation, Rahmaan said.

You can reach George Hunter at (313) 222-2134 or ghunter@detnews.com.

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Detroit leads in risky births

Low weight, lack of prenatal care spur city efforts

BY MEGHA SATYANARAYANA • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • August 7, 2008

Detroit babies are coming into the world earlier and less healthy than babies in other major cities, says a national report of factors leading to infant death. The report covers numbers over a 15-year period ending in 2005.

While the data released Wednesday from Kids Count was not weighted for race, it showed that Detroit mothers-to-be smoked more, were younger and had little prenatal care compared to mothers in other cities.

Three of four moms were unmarried. Detroit babies were born earlier and weighed less, which are often signs of poor prenatal care.

"There's been a massive change in the safety net," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell of Michigan Kids Count.

The collapse of Detroit, she said, "is a piece of why this is happening."

Infant mortality is not only a health problem but a community problem, said Detroit Department of Health and Wellness Promotion Deputy Director Bill Ridella.

Low birth weight is part of poverty, a lack of education, poor housing and environmental factors.

The city offers prenatal clinics and home visit programs. Detroit now is looking at programs that use female members of a community, "the busybodies of the neighborhood," said Ridella, to teach younger women about prenatal care and access to Medicaid and other programs. It's called the Place Matters Initiative.

"It used to be a woman's community," said Health and Wellness Promotion general manager Audrey Smith. "The structure that's not around a young woman who is pregnant, the support system, is not there."

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August 7, 2008

Sen. Nancy Cassis Lansing Connection: Bills to assist homeowners, domestic violence victims

Over the last few months I have introduced several pieces of legislation designed to provide relief to struggling homeowners and stimulate our slumping housing market.

The first bill, SB 1065, would provide relief to homeowners struggling in the current housing market by increasing the Homestead Property Tax Credit from \$1,200 to \$1,300. This bill passed the Senate on March 27 and is currently awaiting a hearing before the House Tax Policy committee.

The Homestead Property Tax Credit is designed to help qualified homeowners and renters pay some of their property taxes by providing them with a tax credit. For most people, the credit is based on a comparison between household income and property taxes paid.

I have also introduced SB 1390 that would allow a county register of deeds to determine and release the dollar amount needed for a homeowner to redeem their home once it is in foreclosure. Unfortunately, current law does not allow the register of deeds to provide this information to a homeowner.

With the number of foreclosures in Michigan continuing to climb, homeowners deserve easier access to the information needed to save their property.

SB 1390 has been referred to the Senate Banking and Financial Institutions Committee.

Another bill, SB 1402, is designed to provide relief for homeowners who sell their home for less than what is still owed on the mortgage. It creates an income tax credit equal to the difference between the sale price of the home and the amount remaining on the mortgage, is capped at \$10,000 and is non-refundable. This will help stimulate Michigan's housing market while making it possible for a homeowner to sell a home prior to losing it to the foreclosure process.

Finally, I have co-sponsored SB 924 introduced by Sen. Tupac Hunter. This bill would create a one-page mortgage disclosure form placing all of the pertinent and critical information that a home owner needs to make an informed decision about purchasing a home on one easy to read and understand page. Some of the information included on this form would be the type of mortgage, the interest rate, the estimated monthly mortgage payment including taxes, and an estimate of your future payments if you have an adjustable rate mortgage.

I believe all of these measures will provide real and immediate relief to homeowners struggling to keep their homes out of foreclosure or attempting to sell their homes.

Landmark water compact signed into law

A historic conservation agreement to prevent other regions of the country and world from diverting water from the Great Lakes has become law.

The measures will adopt the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Water Resources Compact and implement a new standard for evaluating large quantity water withdrawals, including an automated point-and-click computer tool developed by the Groundwater Conservation Advisory Council. All eight Great Lakes states have now taken action on the agreement.

This law bans new water diversions from the Great Lakes basin with limited exceptions for public water supply purposes. It also implements consistent standards for the states and Canadian

provinces to review proposed uses of Great Lakes water, develops regional goals and objectives for water conservation and efficiency that will be reviewed and updated every five years, and develops and implements state water conservation and efficiency programs.

The 12-bill package is backed by many organizations, including the Michigan Farm Bureau, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, Michigan Environmental Council and The Water Works Coalition made up of 15 groups, including the Michigan Chamber of Commerce and Michigan Manufacturers Association.

In order for this to become federal law Congress must approve the Compact. The United States Senate unanimously approved it on Friday, August 1. The House of Representatives is expected to adopt the Compact in September and it is believed that President Bush will give his approval shortly thereafter.

This agreement is a significant step toward protecting our state's greatest natural fresh water resource for generations to come.

Mary's law signed into law

Domestic violence victims in Michigan can now be alerted by satellite technology if their abuser gets nearby under Public Act 192 of 2008.

The new state law, known as Mary's Law, allows Michigan courts to order a defendant charged with a domestic violence crime who is released on bail to wear a GBS device that will automatically send an alarm to the victim if the abuser is nearby.

The 2007 death of Mary Babb in Mount Pleasant and the arrest of her estranged husband on murder charges prompted the legislation. Mr. Babb had been charged with several felony assault charges against his wife and was awaiting trial on those charges when he killed his wife.

This new law provides better protection to domestic violence victims.

Your feedback is always welcome. You can contact me by e-mail at: sennccassis@senate.michigan.gov,

or toll free at 1-888-38-NANCY.

State Senator Nancy Cassis, R-Novi, represents the 15th Senate District, which includes the townships of Commerce, Highland, Holly, Lyon, Milford, Novi, Rose, West Bloomfield and White Lake, as well as the villages of Holly, Milford and Wolverine Lake and the cities of Novi, Northville (the Oakland County portion), Orchard Lake, South Lyon, Walled Lake and Wixom.



KCQ Drive to End Hunger raises funds for 630,000 pounds of food

Posted by Sue White | The Saginaw News August 07, 2008 08:12AM

If you hit a hole-in-one and no one sees it, did it really happen?

"I just wish I had asked someone to pledge money for it," said Jim Kramer, who hosts the morning show at WKCQ-FM, 98.1, with Barb Sheltraw. "It really happened; I've got the flag to prove it."

Tuesday brought 36 teams to the 7th annual KCQ Drive to End Hunger, determined to raise enough money to buy 250,000 pounds of food for the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan.

They raised enough funds for 630,000 pounds.

But Kramer, who set a personal goal of donating 30,000 pounds by playing 54 holes, teed off, alone, at 6:20 a.m. An hour later, still alone on the third hole, he aced his shot.

"I wish someone could have seen it," he admitted as he approached his 45th hole shortly after noon. "But we're all doing well out here, enjoying the weather and meeting our goal.

"If I had only thought to get that pledge ..."

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Protect victim's fund

Thursday, August 07, 2008

Lawmakers should reject legislation to siphon dollars from the Crime Victim's Rights Fund to subsidize other programs. The intent of lawmakers and voters in creating the fund was for the money to only be used to support compensation and services for crime victims -- those preyed upon and suffering physically, emotionally and financially. Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers must look to rein in excess spending in other programs to manage a tight budget, not raid this important fund to shore up a cash-poor state.

Former lawmaker William Van Regenmorter, R-Georgetown Township, was the driving force behind the Crime Victim's Rights Act. That act established the victim's rights fund in 1989. Revenue for the fund comes from fees assessed against convicted criminal defendants -- \$60 for felonies, \$50 for serious misdemeanors such as aggravated assault. Juvenile offenders pay \$20. The fund's current year earnings are about \$10 million, with an \$11.7 million fund balance.

The money provides an array of victim services, including the salaries of the valuable victim advocates located in county prosecutor offices. It compensates victims who have been physically injured but who lack insurance and pays for counseling. The fund also bankrolls the Michigan Crime Victim Notification Network which automatically notifies victims about escapes, releases, transfers or court dates of the people convicted of harming them

The Kent County Prosecutor's Office assisted 329 people with fund claims last year and \$400,000 was awarded.

The bill sponsored by Rep. Gary McDowell, D-Rudyard, would amend the act. He wants to tap the fund's surpluses to pay for any of the following services: the sex offender regis-try, the Amber alert missing child notification system, polygraph tests, forensic science expert witness testimony programs in the Department of State Police, and rape and sexual assault victim treatment services programs in the Department of Human Services.

These are obviously useful programs. They are, however, law enforcement and crime prevention in nature. The implication is this legislation somehow amplifies the effectiveness of the victim's rights fund, rather than merely plundering one fund to finance another. In tight times, the temptation is great to try to find money without raising fees or taxes. Lawmakers must resist the urge to hijack nearly \$3 million from this fund's reserves.

A House Fiscal Agency report says that since fiscal year 2003, the Crime Victim's Rights Fund expenditures have exceeded revenues. That means the fund's reserves are already being used. Diverting dollars would hasten the inevitable depletion of any surplus, and ignores the predictable increases in the costs of victims' services.

A similar proposal last year to use about \$5 million from the fund was thwarted. This bill was referred to the House Appropriations Committee, Reps. Michael Sak, D-Grand

Rapids and David Agema, R-Grandville, as members of the committee, should oppose weakening this vital fund.

For almost 20 years, the will of voters who created the Victim's Rights Fund has been honored. Gov. Granholm and lawmakers would be wise not to erase that legacy, but continue to protect this valuable source of support for those touched by crime.



August 7, 2008

County agency gets new leader

Director settles in at Department of Human Services

BY SHEILA D. YANCY
Times Herald

There's a new person at the helm of the St. Clair County Department of Human Services.

Elreta Dodds of Detroit took the reins of the office in July, becoming the first permanent director since Jim Nunnold retired in 2007. He had been the director since 1997.

Dodds, who has worked for the state Department of Human Services for 23 years, will oversee a number of programs including those that help needy families and protect children. She also will have an opportunity to focus on some key initiatives, including licensing for foster parents.

"I would like relatives to have the benefit of licensure," Dodds said, "... to help financially to care for their relatives' children who might have had to come into their care."

Dodds said she also would like to find out why there are so many minority children in the foster care system locally and nationwide. Dodds said she is gathering statistics to determine how substantial the problem is in St. Clair County and is trying to determine how the situation can be addressed.

Ideally, Dodds said, she would like to see all concerned parties involved in the decision-making process surrounding the placement of children in foster care. She said those concerned parties include parents, teachers, health-care specialists and social workers.

Dodds, an ordained minister, said she already has some ties in St. Clair County. She has been associate minister of Faith Christian Community Church in Port Huron since 2005. She started attending the church in 2004.

"I think my connections in the church community will help to endear me," she said. "Many already know my character."

"I'm going to do my best to do the fair and right thing for people in St. Clair (County)."
